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research article

Where do my people go? Fear of extinction among minorities fleeing Bangladesh

Rajat Mitra, rajatmitra61@gmail.com
Pankaj Singh, ahlawat.pank@gmail.com
Amity University, India

Nidhi Mitra, nidhimitra70@gmail.com
Swanchetan Society for Mental Health, India

This study examines the development of the 'fear of extinction' among minority communities, focusing on individuals who fled Bangladesh due to perceived threats to their survival. The authors define fear of extinction as an 'overwhelming fear of violence and threat marked by persecution, humiliation and loss that makes the individual unable to cope and develops a subjective awareness that their group is facing annihilation because of their beliefs, ideology or religion'.

In-depth interviews with 20 Bangladeshi minorities (aged 18–56, mean age = 40.85) resettled in Assam, West Bengal, and Delhi, India were conducted. Through Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis the researchers identified six key themes – humiliation, threats, violence, persecution, loss and coping – that drive the 'fear of extinction' among minorities. This research reveals stages how the sequence of traumatic events leads to a subjective awareness of group extinction among minorities?

By exploring the formation of this fear, the study contributes to the broader understanding of how minority populations perceive and respond to extinction threats. The research highlights the psychological impacts of systemic victimisation on marginalised groups, raising awareness and advocating for targeted support.

Keywords victimisation • persecution • minorities of Bangladesh • fear of extinction • collective angst

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> Bangladesh's interim government has an absolute obligation to protect its Hindu minority and meaningfully address the protests of thousands of minority Hindus in outcry over the recent wave of attacks and harassment.
>
> Congressman Brad Sherman, USA

Introduction

Amidst escalating communal tensions, the arrest of a Hindu monk and the tragic death of a Muslim lawyer have ignited a series of violent episodes, including targeted attacks on minorities and their homes engulfed in flames. This situation necessitates an urgent examination of the volatile interplay between faith, justice and mob violence in a fractured society (Marof, 2024).

The Partition of India in 1947 divided the subcontinent along religious lines into two countries – India and Pakistan. This event profoundly altered the lives of approximately 384 million people, resulting in one of the largest mass migrations in history. Many families were uprooted, triggering massacres, sexual violence and immense suffering, leaving a lasting scar in both nations (Talbot and Singh, 2009). While many Hindus migrated to India and Muslims to Pakistan, a substantial number of minorities remained in their native lands, believing their cultural and religious rights would be protected.

Panjabi (2005) describes the 'schizophrenic existence' experienced by 14 million displaced individuals during the Partition of India. This trauma is underpinned by deep divisions, marked by religious, ethnic and ideological differences. The unresolved trauma of Partition remains a source of conflict and division, continuing to affect generations.

Basu and Miroshnik (2017) further explored the transgenerational effects of Partition, where the 'us versus them' mentality continues to influence both personal and communal spaces. Drawing on second-generation experiences of Partition, Sarin and Jain (2018) explored how the 1947 division fragmented bodies, minds and relationships, resulting in millions of deaths and displacements. They note that, unlike Holocaust trauma, the trauma of Partition has not received significant academic attention.

Kamra (2006) further questions this disparity, highlighting the lack of historicisation of Partition trauma compared to colonialism, with its devastating impact largely explored through literature and the arts rather than systematic historical inquiry. Sarin and Jain (2018b) also criticised the absence of psychiatric discourse on Partition trauma, arguing that its profound effects were overlooked or dismissed as culturally irrelevant. This neglect has exacerbated India's societal trauma and calls for urgent research into the long-term impacts of Partition and the minority population's experiences.

In 1971, East Pakistan seceded from West Pakistan, resulting in the formation of Bangladesh. Minority families were disproportionately targeted by both the Pakistani military and local collaborators, leading to mass displacement and the destruction of entire communities (Alamgir and D'Costa, 2011). In his book *The Blood Telegram*, American diplomat Archer Blood wrote to the US government on 25 May 1971, stating, 'There is evidence of systematic persecution of the minorities which is too detailed and massive to be ignored' (Bass, 2013).

The minority population in Bangladesh has steadily declined and now faces the fear of extinction. The rise of Islamist political formations in Bangladesh during the 1990s had led to the intimidation and attacks on minorities, with many fleeing to India (Amnesty International, 2013). The minority population in Bangladesh has steadily declined from 22 per cent in 1951 to 9 per cent in 2011 (Haider and Kamal, 2019). Human Rights Watch (2019) continues to document the persecution of religious

minorities in Bangladesh, including the abduction and forced conversion of Hindu and Christian girls.

The marginalisation of minorities in Bangladesh stems from a confluence of historical and contemporary factors, particularly legal frameworks, and socio-political dynamics. Historically, the Vested Property Act of 1974 has been a significant instrument of disenfranchisement, enabling the state to confiscate land from the owners belonging to minority community under the pretext of national security, effectively labelling them as suspect citizens (Panday, 2016; Feldman, 2016). This legislation has led to extensive land dispossession and economic marginalisation within minority communities (Panday, 2016). In contemporary contexts, the majoritarian state structure, which privileges the socio-cultural dominance of the Muslim majority, has systematically sidelined minority rights and interests, even as constitutional provisions purport to ensure equality (Pattanaik, 2013). Furthermore, legal and state mechanisms have entrenched the exclusion of minorities from property ownership and political representation, deepening their marginalised status (Feldman, 2016).

Political entities frequently exploit minority identities for electoral gain, treating these communities as strategic vote banks rather than as equal constituents with full citizenship rights (Wani and Khazir, 2019). This instrumentalisation of minority groups intensifies societal divisions, fuelling cycles of violence and insecurity that disproportionately affect these populations (Koopmans, 2018).

Recent findings reveal a marked surge in violent acts against minority groups, raising concerns of potential ethnic cleansing and fear of extinction akin to historical instances of mass violence (Ahmmed, 2014). The systemic lack of accountability within state institutions perpetuates the marginalisation of these communities, heightening their vulnerability. This governance failure has catalysed demands for international oversight and intervention to address the escalating crisis (Anonyma, 2016).

The fear of extinction follows ordinary principles of human cognition, affect and behaviour. Under certain societal and political conditions (for example, political upheaval, genocidal intentions, autocratic rule), it escalates into extreme violence (Dutton, 2012). An early warning system for increased fear of extinction should include recognition of seemingly ordinary processes of exclusion and the normalisation of violence, even when these may seem 'below the threshold' of concern (Karstedt, 2012).

Exclusionary ideologies establish a psychological framework that justifies the marginalisation of specific groups, thereby increasing their vulnerability to fear of extinction (Harff, 2003). The fear of extinction is often amplified by narratives that depict certain communities as existential threats, further entrenching societal divisions and legitimising acts of violence (Barkan, 2000). Historical inequalities and deep-seated religious divides provide fertile ground for the proliferation of these exclusionary ideologies, often resulting in conflict and regime collapse (Eidelson and Eidelson, 2003).

Marginalisation of the minorities can often be interpreted through a social psychological process called dehumanisation. It often manifests through explicit language that likens victims to vermin or animals, as seen in genocides like the Holocaust and Rwanda (Landry et al, 2024). This strategy makes acts of violence less morally repugnant and facilitates moral disengagement, allowing perpetrators to preserve a positive image of themselves while committing harm. Dehumanisation significantly impacts victims by intensifying social exclusion and diminishing

empathetic responses from others, thereby aggravating mental health challenges (Haslam, 2024).

According to Harrison (2000), conflicts between neighbours or ethnic groups often arise from rivalry rooted in similarity, rather than difference. Similarly, Girard (2003). argues that the primary source of conflict is mimetic rivalry – the tendency to fight with others to affirm differences that may not even exist. This dynamic is particularly relevant in the context of Bangladesh, where religious minorities and Muslims once shared many cultural and social similarities.

Maniadakis (2019) investigated the transgenerational transmission of trauma in large social groups, focusing on Vamik Volkan's concept of chosen trauma which emphasises that the collective memories of historical trauma are passed down, shaping group identity and cohesion. Further, shared experiences of victimisation can also serve to strengthen group ties, as shared narratives of suffering can enhance identity and group membership (Craig and Richeson, 2016). This points to collective victimisation as a theoretical framework for comprehensive understanding of the fear of extinction, as it explores the interpersonal processes that define group identity, memory and collective actions through shared experiences of victimisation (Vollhardt, 2015). In this way, the framework demonstrates that victimisation is not only individual but collective, through which group members internalise prevailing narratives of victimisation and endangerment. Thus, providing a clearer picture of fear of extinction as a complex, distinct psychological and social experience. In addition, addressing collective trauma in marginalised communities offers valuable insights for both academic and practical interventions (Vollhardt, 2015; Noor et al, 2012).

Thus, this study aims to explore the development and underlying factors of the 'fear of extinction' among minority communities who fled Bangladesh, with a focus on uncovering the stages through which collective victimisation fosters a subjective awareness of group extinction, ultimately contributing to a deeper understanding of how minority populations perceive and respond to systemic threats and advocating for targeted support for marginalised groups.

Method

The present study is part of a broader research initiative aimed at developing a scale to measure the fear of extinction among minority population fleeing Bangladesh in the immediate aftermath of recent events. The initial phase of this project involved a qualitative investigation to document the victimisation experiences of minority population who migrated from Bangladesh. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was utilised to examine the participants' lived experiences, emphasising their personal narratives and subjective interpretations of these events. IPA facilitates an in-depth understanding of an individual's subjective world through the researcher's interpretive engagement with the data.

Participants

The study involved 20 minorities (18 males and two females) who fled from Bangladesh to India, all of whom reported fearing for their lives if they remained in the country. None of the participants were affiliated with any political party or

ideology. Data were collected from three locations in India – Assam, West Bengal and Delhi – where a significant number of Bangladeshi minorities had resided during the preceding three months. Participants' ages ranged from 18 to 56 years, with a mean age of 40.85 years.

The gender imbalance among participants may be attributed to concerns regarding identity disclosure; female participants expressed greater apprehension, fearing that revealing their identities could endanger family members still in Bangladesh – a risk that has been documented in prior cases involving minorities migrated from Bangladesh. Participants were stratified by age, region, religion and educational level. Of the total, 35 per cent were categorised as young adults and 65 per cent were classified as middle-aged adults. Regional distribution indicated that 60 per cent originated from the Khulna region and 40 per cent from the Barisal region of Bangladesh.

Regarding religious affiliation, 19 participants identified as Hindu and one as Christian. Educational attainment varied, with 15 per cent being illiterate, 10 per cent having completed primary education, 55 per cent having completed secondary education, and 20 per cent holding a graduate degree.

Setting and data collection

Each participant was individually interviewed in person by one of the three researchers involved in the study. Semi-structured interviews were conducted between 30 August 2024, and 15 September 2024, to collect qualitative data. To ensure a secure and comfortable environment conducive to in-depth discussions, interviews took place at the participants' temporary lodgings. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and strict confidentiality measures were upheld.

Given the sensitive nature of the study, male researchers interviewed male participants, while female researchers conducted interviews with female participants. Initial contact with the participants was facilitated by the community leader (Modol), and significant time was invested in building trust and rapport. Each interview lasted an average of 90 to 120 minutes, excluding the rapport-building phase, and was conducted in Bengali, a language in which all participants were proficient.

Data analysis

The data obtained from the interviews were transcribed in a meticulous manner and subjected to IPA. The coding and formation of themes were carried out using the QSR NVivo 14 version. The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. To ensure participant anonymity, the names and identifying characteristics were modified. The transcripts were reviewed multiple times to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the data. The researchers used a line-by-line coding method. In the initial phase, through open coding, the data were segmented into discrete units with labels (codes) assigned to text segments according to their content. Axial coding was subsequently applied to identify the relationships between themes and sub-themes. Codes derived from the open coding process were grouped into categories by organising them based on thematic connections. Superordinate themes and their corresponding sub-themes

were subsequently delineated by examining the relationships and clusters inherent within the emergent themes. Upon completion of the interpretative analysis of all participants, a master list of themes was formulated by synthesising and reorganising the themes across all cases. The selection of master themes was predicated not only on their frequency of occurrence but also on additional criteria, including thematic richness and the degree to which a theme encapsulated significant components of participants' responses.

These themes were identified by the authors, followed by collaborative discussions to ensure that the interpretations were firmly rooted in the participants' data. A member-checking method was employed to enhance the validity of the findings. Final themes and sub-themes were sent to the participants through community leaders (Modol), and feedback was solicited for any potential modifications to the themes. Twenty participants were contacted, and all responded, indicating no need for changes.

Results

Analysis of the narratives identified six key themes related to the experiences of minorities from Bangladesh: (1) humiliation, (2) threat, (3) violence, (4) loss, (5) persecution and (6) coping. The major themes are illustrated in Figure 1.

Theme 1: Humiliation

The first theme in the study was humiliation, in which members of the study reported being demeaned and dehumanised by the majority through public rituals and ceremonies. Processions protesting against their biggest festival taking place and were under threat of being attacked.

Three sub-themes emerged that led to the first major theme of humiliation, and which was reported by all 20 participants in this study: (a) insulting ceremonies or rituals, (b) exclusion from others, and (c) discrimination from childhood. The first sub-theme, insulting ceremonies or rituals, encapsulates participants' experiences of systematically devaluing their cultural and religious practices, serving to signify

Figure 1: Themes of fear of extinction

their inferiority and powerlessness: 'But, the males of the majority community used to throw stones at us if we used to organise any puja. Even, they asked us to remove the deity or any audio speaker in the function. We then dismantled the tent and completed the rituals inside the house individually' (Participant#2). Participants indicated that these insults manifested in various forms, including the desecration of idols and places of worship, public cow slaughter and the prohibition of public celebrations. The desecration of sacred idols and worship sites, public slaughter of cows and restriction of public celebrations collectively constitute profound affronts to an individual's religious and cultural dignity (Allie, 2023): 'The whispers and gossip within the community painted us as outsiders, people who did not belong, and this narrative was reinforced daily. Our temple, the heart of our spiritual life, was desecrated multiple times, each act of vandalism a cruel reminder that our faith was not respected' (Participant#17).

Similarly, cow slaughter, particularly within Hindu contexts, directly violates the reverence of the cow, which is viewed as a sacred symbol of nonviolence and purity (Flood, 1996): 'Once India won a cricket match and some of us were happy and it came to the notice of our neighbours. They came to know we are celebrating at home. They threw the head of a cow in our home. My mother vomited. It was done to humiliate us' (Participant#14). The suppression of public celebrations such as religious festivals or pujas further limited the individuals' ability to express their identity, resulting in feelings of marginalisation, powerlessness and humiliation.

The second sub-theme, exclusion from others, emerged through participants' experiences of being shown as inferior and subjected to ridicule based on their identity, which led to a profound sense of humiliation by undermining their sense of belonging, self-worth and dignity. Exclusion from others was facilitated through implicit rules that systematically discriminated against the community of the participants.

> One of the most degrading experiences I suffered was being offered water or tea in broken cups, or worse, in plastic bags, as if to emphasise my perceived unworthiness. The message was clear: in their eyes, I did not deserve even the basic dignity of a proper cup. The psychological impact of this constant belittlement was profound, making me feel less than human. (Participant#20)

The ridicule of one's identity – whether based on race, religion, gender or other fundamental aspects of the self – targets personal values and a sense of self-respect, often resulting in feelings of shame, vulnerability and dehumanisation. Over time, it can erode self-esteem, exacerbate anxiety and heighten feelings of powerlessness, ultimately leading to a pervasive sense of humiliation (Utley et al, 2022).

> I still remember that one day I was purchasing something from a fair and a group of majority community started mocking at my wife by commenting on her attire (saree). They told us that we look fools in this dress and started laughing after seeing 'Sindoor' in my wife's upper forehead (Sindoor is a traditional vermilion red or orange-red cosmetic powder, used by married Hindu women in South Asia to indicate married status). It was so embarrassing in the public that without saying a word we left for our home. (Participant#1)

The third sub-theme of humiliation, discrimination from childhood, was characterised by experiences such as adopting a submissive posture, being forced to sit separately from members of the majority community, and being compelled to disclose one's identity in public spaces: 'I learned early on that my survival depended on keeping my head down and avoiding any form of confrontation' (Participant#5). These practices not only resulted in physical segregation, but also reinforced social hierarchies, positioning individuals as different or inferior from an early age. Such discriminatory behaviours systematically eroded their sense of belonging and self-worth, thereby perpetuating a cycle of exclusion and humiliation that extended into later stages of life.

Theme 2: Threat

In the context of fear of extinction, 'threat' refers to the imminent or ongoing danger that compels individuals to think of their safety and survival. Such threats often encompass a range of severe risks, including ever-present danger, intimidation by hostile forces, and incidents such as kidnapping of minority children or relatives.

Nineteen participants reported incidents of threat, with the identified sub-themes being (a) ever-present danger, (b) intimidation and (c) kidnapping. These sub-themes reflect the various forms of experiences encountered by the participants, contributing to a pervasive sense of threat and insecurity in their daily lives. The ever-present danger was characterised by a heightened sense of vulnerability in public spaces, sudden provocations, unforeseen gatherings of mobs and occurrences of blasphemy. These factors collectively foster an environment of continuous threat, in which individuals experience a persistent risk of violence or humiliation. This perpetual state of uncertainty contributed to heightened awareness of potential harm, further exacerbating feelings of insecurity and fear (Stevens and Thijs, 2018).

> In Bangladesh what is most scary now are the crowds that gather near your neighbourhood. They march, raise slogans and their anger turns to either India or sometimes USA. Then they start marching to Hindu homes. If they catch a Hindu on the road his death is certain. It is a time we run from our homes and take shelter elsewhere. Several Hindu holy men were caught and their hair cut off and religious symbols erased. (Participant#15)

Intimidation by hostile forces frequently manifests through coercive tactics, including threatening phone calls or messages, which pressure individuals to convert their religious or ideological beliefs. These warnings are deliberate acts of psychological manipulation designed to instil fear and to compel compliance.

> When I firmly declined, the tone shifted. I started receiving anonymous threats, ominous warnings scribbled on notes left at my doorstep, and unsettling phone calls in the dead of night. Once, while walking home, I was cornered by a group of men who made it clear that my refusal to convert would have dire consequences. (Participant#4)

The kidnapping of relatives and children constitutes a significant threat, as it directly endangers the safety of their family members. Such acts of abduction serve as a form

of coercion, heightening the psychological distress experienced by minorities, and placing them under considerable pressure.

> The most upsetting moment came when they kidnapped my daughter and forcibly converted and raped her. They told me if I resist, they will kidnap my younger daughters too. The thought of my beloved child being taken and stripped of her identity was a terror beyond words. I am not the same anymore. (Participant#17)

Theme 3: Violence

In the context of fear of extinction within their country of origin, 'violence' refers to mass violence and the intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against minority individuals or groups that results in or has a high likelihood of causing harm, injury or death. This mass violence can take various forms, including systematic persecution, armed conflict, sexual violence and torture, and is often targeted at specific ethnic, religious or political groups.

The theme of violence was reported by all participants and was characterised by the following sub-themes: (a) verbal violence, (b) physical violence, (c) structural violence and (d) collective violence. The sub-theme of verbal violence emerged from the use of religious slurs, provocative language and abusive remarks. A religious slur constitutes a form of symbolic violence, as it attacks an individual's core identity, beliefs and cultural values, often leading to psychological harm and social marginalisation: 'Every visit to the market or public gathering was filled with tension, as I was met with stares and derogatory remarks. They would laugh at the tilak on my forehead and the sacred threads I wore, branding me with slurs and descriptions meant to belittle my heritage' (Participant#17).

Physical violence was the second sub-theme, encompassing instances in which participants experienced direct bodily harm or threats of harm. This form of violence manifests in various ways, including witnessing physical aggression, unprovoked attacks and beatings, often targeting individuals based on their identity, such as religious, ethnic or cultural affiliations.

> One day I was passing through the market with my wife and a group of Muslim males identified my wife's dress and suspected that I am a Hindu as I was accompanying her. They then approached me and asked my name so as soon as I revealed my name, they started slapping me causally and pushing me against the wall. They manhandled me and only when my wife intervened, they stopped harassing me. (Participant#1)

Structural violence was the third sub-theme, encompassing instances where participants experienced systemic discrimination, abuse or maltreatment facilitated or condoned by formal institutions, such as state or law enforcement agencies. This form of violence is marked by the failure of institutions to uphold the human rights and dignity of individuals, particularly those from marginalised groups. It is characterised by unequal treatment, and reinforcement of discriminatory practices, which perpetuate social inequalities and contribute to the marginalisation and vulnerability of affected populations (Weigert, 2010).

> I was tortured by police for being a spy for Border security force of India. My family has served Bangladesh very well. We have been loyal to the country. We even cheered for Bangladeshi cricket team to show our loyalty. We even supported Bangladesh to show that our hearts are here. But all that was of no use and yet this happened to us. (Participant#9)

Collective violence was the fourth sub-theme, including incidents of stoning, physical assault, lynching and beheading. These acts of violence, often carried out by groups, are characterised by their organised and communal nature, where individuals or communities are targeted in a collective and brutal manner.

> Then suddenly, one young man took a stone and threw at the temple and this act has given almost an informal right to damage our temple. They then desecrated our auspicious place and we all started crying. We were seeing the whole act from the window of our house and it has terrified us. I was wondering what will happen if they all turn towards my house and target it like they have done it with the temple. (Participant#1)

Each of these sub-themes illustrates the different manifestations of violence experienced by participants, highlighting the multifaceted nature of their victimisation.

Theme 4: Loss

Within the framework of victimisation in their country of origin, 'loss' refers to the profound and multifaceted experiences of bereavement and deprivation that individuals endure as a result of conflict, persecution and displacement. Nineteen participants mentioned the major theme of loss as the loss of family members, homes, community ties and loss of honour which can significantly impact mental and emotional well-being. The sub-themes of loss included the loss of family members, home or land, dignity and honour, anticipatory grief, freedom, religion, and places of worship. 'My grandparents, uncles, and cousins are still stuck in an area in Bangladesh where they face daily threats and persecution. The constant worry for their safety, the fear that one day they might be the next targets of violence or forced conversions, is a relentless burden' (Participant#10).

Losing one's house or land is acutely distressing for the participants, as it signifies not only the loss of physical shelter and security, but also displacement from a location imbued with personal, cultural and familial meaning. Homes and land often serve as symbols of stability, identity, belonging, grounding individuals within their communities, and heritage.

> I am carrying my house key. I took a video of locking my home. I have proof I left it. I can go back to it one day and reclaim it. I told my family not to cry and look at the key. We may rebuild our life one day again. (Participant#9)

Participants mentioned that degradation of dignity can exacerbate psychological distress, leading to feelings of humiliation, shame and disempowerment. Additionally, the erosion of honour may weaken their social cohesion within

minority communities, as traditional values and hierarchies are disrupted, further impeding their ability to rebuild their lives and integrate into new environments (Uskul et al, 2024).

> The Hindus who ran away during Partition and could not make it died once. They who stayed back died every day. Bangladeshi Muslims never greet Hindus on the road but often spit on seeing them. They never smile at us. Here in India, everyone smiles and welcomes us. In Bangladesh we never greeted anyone. The Hindu has to show respect towards the Muslim and give way to him. (Participant#14)

The members of the study frequently reported that they often experience severe curtailment of freedom, which contributes to feelings of powerlessness, frustration and anxiety: 'I remember vividly the times during my childhood in school when they forced me to recite the Kalma, the Islamic declaration of faith, despite knowing it was against my beliefs. Each recitation felt like a betrayal of my identity, a painful reminder of the power they held over us' (Participant#3).

The 20 participants who came from their country of origin expressed a profound sense of anticipatory grief, likening their experiences to a slow drawn-out death. Many reported that the realisation of this grief comes late during a crisis like the present one, when much of what they once thought they valued – such as their community, opportunities and sense of the future – is already lost and the only redemption is saving the lives of future generations (Bryant et al, 2020). This enduring sense of loss becomes an ongoing emotional burden, shaping their identity and future, as they face existential uncertainties: 'You realise you have died slowly every day when you are in midst of the crisis such as the present, when almost everything seems finished. Quick death is understood easily, slow death is more difficult to understand and not seen so easily' (Participant#13).

Each of these sub-themes reflects the deep and varied aspects of loss experienced by members during the present crisis, highlighting the profound impact of victimisation on their sense of identity, security and cultural belonging.

Theme 5: Persecution

The major theme of persecution emerged from the analysis of several sub-themes, including false allegations, harassment, policies and laws targeting minorities, and persecution by even the criminal justice system. All participants mentioned this theme in their interviews and provided accounts of how each sub-theme contributed to persecution in their country of origin. False allegations were frequently used to falsely accuse individuals of criminals or offences of blasphemy, leading to social stigmatisation and violence (Sajjad, 2023).

> I heard my neighbouring shop owners used to fight among themselves for having a claim on my shop. They used to tell when will this Hindu will leave Bangladesh then I will have a claim on this shop and his women. Sometimes, the fight used to go so bad that locals used to call police to resolve their clashes. (Participant#13)

Policies and laws targeting minorities institutionalised the discrimination participants experienced. These policies, often deliberately crafted to marginalise certain groups, reinforce their exclusion and create a framework for ongoing persecution (Tanyaş, 2024). 'The systemic barriers to education and opportunities compound my struggles. Scholarships and school resources are often denied to Hindu students and my achievements are downplayed or ignored' (Participant#10). Finally, persecution by the criminal justice system emerged as a critical factor.

Participants explained how the justice system was manipulated to specifically target them, by ignoring their pleas and supporting the majority community.

> I had extended a hand of friendship and trust by giving loans twice to members of the majority community, believing in the principles of goodwill and mutual support. However, when it came time for repayment, they flatly refused, laughing in my face and mocking my naivety. Desperate, I turned to the local authorities, hoping for justice and the enforcement of the law. Yet, my pleas fell on deaf ears. The officials, influenced by bias and corruption, showed no interest in aiding a Hindu man against the majority. (Participant#19)

Collectively, these sub-themes formed a comprehensive structure of persecution that ultimately forced participants to flee their country in search of safety.

Theme 6: Coping

In the present study, 17 participants reported a major theme of coping, which emerged from the analysis of several sub-themes. These sub-themes included collective group activities, denial, rituals and religious gatherings, professional dedication, reading scriptures or holding values, and religious trips to India. Participants identified engagement in collective activities as a significant coping mechanism, providing social support and fostering a sense of community (Gasparre et al, 2010).

A coping strategy involving denial was noted in which individuals reported avoiding the acknowledgment of their experiences as a means of emotional self-protection: 'Silence became my constant companion, a shield against the hostility of the majority community. I learned to withdraw, to make myself invisible, hoping that in my passivity, I may survive' (Participant#2).

Participants emphasised the importance of rituals and religious gatherings, which served as a source of comfort and connection to a broader community and spiritual framework (Acevedo et al, 2014): 'I found peace in meditation and prayer, grounding myself in my faith and drawing strength from its teachings. Volunteering at our local temple, I helped others facing similar struggles, finding purpose in service' (Participant#18).

Engagement with religious texts was frequently cited as a coping strategy that provides participants with guidance, solace and reinforcement of their values during difficult times (Brewster et al, 2016): '[I] also turn to the rich texts of Hindu scriptures and stories, drawing inspiration from the tales of courage and righteousness that have been passed down through generations. These stories remind me that perseverance in the face of adversity is a core value of our faith' (Participant#10).

Participants described religious pilgrimages to India as transformative experiences that allowed spiritual reconnection and personal healing: 'Every individual carries a small deity of Durga in their position from Bangladesh. Our hope is our imagination that we will do Durga puja one day. The imagination of going to Haridwar and India give us hope' (Participant#11).

Many participants expressed that focusing on professional responsibilities coping by offering a sense of purpose and distraction from personal struggles: 'Despite the hostility, I found solace in my work, pouring my heart and soul into each electrical project, no matter how small or large. The satisfaction of solving complex wiring problems and restoring power to homes and businesses became my refuge' (Participant#18). These findings highlight the diverse and multifaceted nature of coping mechanisms employed by participants in response to their experiences.

Discussion

The findings from the analysis of the lived experiences of minority population from Bangladesh highlight profound and multidimensional themes that encompass personal, social and systemic violations of dignity, safety and identity. The six key themes – humiliation, threat, violence, loss, persecution, and coping – illustrate the depth and complexity of the challenges that the participants endure. These themes not only reflect the traumatic nature of their experiences but also underline the socio-cultural and political dynamics that shape their victimisation and lead to the fear of extinction.

The six factors derived from this study emphasise the victims' adaptation to ongoing victimisation, which they eventually normalised as banal because trauma can solidify religious beliefs, particularly when such beliefs offer a structure for processing and dealing with the trauma (Leo et al, 2021). Participants reported an intuitive sense that something was amiss, yet they struggled to articulate or identify these changes due to fear of judgement. The realisation of an extinction threat was described as a sudden emotional response rather than a conclusion reached through a cognitive process.

The recollections of participants in this study highlighted specific events contributing to their dehumanisation, including the destruction of religious structures, reports of mass rapes, threats to ban religious festivals such as Durga Puja, and the prohibition of displaying Hindu symbols in public (Sadia, 2024). These experiences culminated in a profound sense of imminent annihilation, solidifying the decision to flee their country of origin.

The themes – humiliation, threat, violence, loss, persecution and coping – indicate an overwhelming fear of extinction of the Bangladeshi minorities, able to be understood through the lens of collective victimisation as defined by Vollhardt (2015). This approach looks at how groups understand and react to systemic oppression, emphasising shared trauma and existential threats to identity (Vollhardt, 2015). These themes map onto the dimension of victimhood as inclusiveness during traumatic experiences, in which members of minorities appreciate that their own suffering is part of a much larger background of structural violence, which strengthens solidarity, but also continues to express anxiety about the erasure of culture (Bar-Tal et al, 2009; Vollhardt, 2015). The themes align with the inclusive victimhood dimension, where minorities recognise their suffering as part of a broader pattern of structural violence, reinforcing solidarity yet also perpetuating anxiety about cultural erasure (Bar-Tal et al, 2009; Vollhardt, 2015). For instance, violence and persecution signify

direct victimisation, while loss and humiliation underscore psychological and cultural degradation, exacerbating existential dread. Coping strategies, though adaptive, may be constrained by the pervasive threat of extinction, mirroring the assertion that victimised groups often internalise their vulnerability (Vollhardt, 2015). This framework thus illuminates how systemic oppression fosters a collective consciousness of endangerment, shaping minorities' survival narratives in Bangladesh.

The decision to flee appears to lie on a continuum, ranging from an impulsive escape from immediate danger to a gradual and deliberative process aimed at seeking a better life. Participants in this study revealed a sequence of experiences culminating in the perception of imminent annihilation and the necessity of flight. For clarity and brevity, these experiences have been categorised into six distinct stages.

First stage: Denial stage

In this stage, subjects describe living on the margins of society, accepting their predicament as second-class citizens while simultaneously enduring systemic discrimination and victimisation. They recalled incidents from their childhood in Bangladesh where they experienced public insults and ridicule, which were later rationalised by elders as a normal part of life. This normalisation of discrimination led them to believe that such experiences were insignificant and unlikely to escalate further.

Subjects shared that their parents and ancestors had faced similar incidents and coped through silence, perpetuating a belief that restraint and non-provocation were key to survival. They likened this mindset to the Jews before the Holocaust, who believed that avoiding confrontation and remaining silent about insults and injustices would ensure their survival, as it had for previous generations (Finkel, 2018).

Second stage: Witnessing

During this period, participants described experiencing or witnessing traumatic and overwhelming incidents that fundamentally altered their worldview. The authors identified six critical events derived from the six overarching themes of humiliation, threat, violence, loss, persecution and coping, each of which profoundly impacted the participants. At least one or more of these events directly affected every participant, shaping their lived experiences and reinforcing their sense of vulnerability.

One significant event reported by participants was the abduction, rape or forced conversion of female family members or neighbours. These incidents disrupted participants' initial denial, as they shifted from perceiving such crimes as distant and unrelated to realising their proximity and personal relevance. This transition heightened their awareness of the dangers surrounding them.

Another pivotal event involved the kidnapping and forced conversion of young males known to the participants. These acts intensified the perceived threat, as participants began to believe that they or their immediate family members might be targeted next. This realisation amplified their fear and deepened their sense of insecurity.

The destruction and desecration of religious symbols further reinforced participants' vulnerability. Reports of nearby temples being destroyed or religious ceremonies being desecrated created a profound sense of insecurity and loss within the community, striking at the core of their cultural and spiritual identity.

Aggressive crowds and overt threats added to participants' distress. Accounts included large groups gathering near their homes or neighbourhoods, chanting threatening slogans and issuing ultimatums to either convert or leave the country. The sheer scale and hostility of these confrontations left participants feeling cornered and defenceless.

Public sacrificial displays of sacred animals in market squares were another source of profound distress. Participants reported that these acts were designed to intimidate and provoke, with forced public witnessing exacerbating the trauma. This form of psychological violence left an indelible mark on their sense of security and dignity.

Lastly, discriminatory legal outcomes eroded participants' trust in institutional safeguards. Participants described how legal disputes over property, livestock or fields were consistently resolved in favour of the majority community, both in police stations and courts. This systemic bias further diminished their confidence in seeking justice or protection from authorities.

These events, individually or collectively, had an overwhelming psychological impact, fundamentally altering participants' perception of safety and survival within their country of origin.

Third stage: Escalation awareness

This stage marks the realisation that the incidents of persecution are no longer isolated but widely discussed within larger groups through private meetings and social media. The exponential rise in such events, coupled with feelings of helplessness, creates a heightened state of nervousness and anxiety among the subjects. During this stage, the subjects described their hope as existing in a binary manner, on a continuum, the other end being despair. Hope according to the subjects in the study was fleeting, sustaining for a brief period before being replaced by an awareness of the harsh reality of persecution that pierced through communal and individual barriers against the hope.

Fourth stage: Perceived extinction threat

At this stage, subjects first perceive the fear of extinction. They begin to believe that their community's survival is in grave jeopardy and see conversion or migration as the only viable means to avoid annihilation.

Fifth stage: Collective angst

This stage is characterised by a collective sense of impending doom, where subjects anticipate a catastrophic and overwhelming event that will devastate their entire community. The uncertainty of when this event will occur intensifies their fear and anxiety.

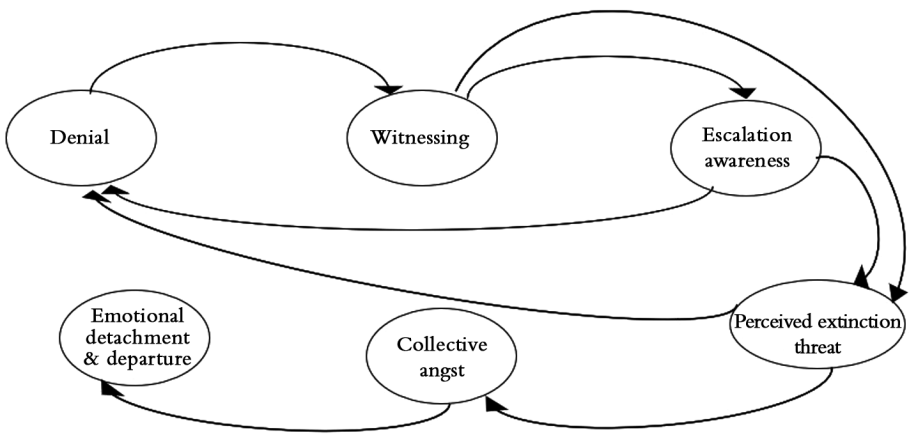
Sixth stage: Emotional detachment and departure decision

The transition from the second to the final stage occurred within the last six months, marked by a sudden and exponential increase in specific events widely reported across social media. Subjects in this stage sever emotional ties to their homeland, including their homes, land and even personal attachments such as pets and animals. This detachment marks the final psychological step towards making the definitive decision to leave their country.

While exploring the genesis of fear of extinction and how it leads to a decision to look for refuge, the authors noted distinct stages that follow each other in a sequence. The sequence runs through denial, witnessing, escalation, perceived extinction threat, collective angst, detachment and the decision to depart. These stages are an approximation and do not necessarily follow a linear model every time but a zigzag fashion at times where the subject may travel back and forth between the stages before making a final decision that marks an end of ambivalence (see Figure 2). The sequence of these stages is elucidated through a case study derived from one of the participants in this research, providing a detailed, contextualised account of their lived experiences and trajectory towards refugeehood.

Parimal (pseudonym), 39 years, shared with us that he was living in denial that he and his family would never have to leave his *bhitey* (ancestral home) like others, as his neighbours promised to protect him. He witnessed the daughter of his friend being abducted but rationalised it and told his family that it would never happen to his daughters. There was mass violence at a temple in a nearby village where he felt a threat of extinction. He continued to reassure his family that they were safe after his neighbours came and told him not to leave. He lived safely for a few months. Then he witnessed his neighbour beating his chest outside a courtroom because one of his daughters was abducted and converted. He went to a meeting where other men shared their collective angst about their daughters being kidnapped. Parimal said it broke his denial. It led him to plan an escape. This model is an approximation to how the fear of extinction rises in communities facing persecution and tries to map a model of how members of a population facing the fear of extinction go through

Figure 2: Stages of forced migration for minorities



different stages, sometimes several times, before finally escaping. The different stages exhibit a complex interplay between them where a subject may go back and forth between different stages in a zigzag manner before arriving at a decision.

Limitations

This study relies on self-reported data, which introduces the risk of recall bias or exaggeration, as participants may unintentionally or intentionally misrepresent aspects of their experiences.

Future research can address these limitations by incorporating larger and more diverse participant samples and employing mixed-method approaches. Further, while the study sheds light on gendered patterns of victimisation, it does not adequately explore other intersecting identities – such as class, disability or sexual orientation – leaving important gaps in understanding the broader spectrum of vulnerability.

Implications and scope

The findings offer critical insights into the extinction of communities within socio-political contexts characterised by cultural and religious discrimination. Themes of humiliation, threat, violence and loss underscore the multidimensional nature of victimisation, shaped by personal, social and institutional factors. These results highlight the urgent need for interventions addressing both the emotional and socio-cultural needs of endangered populations.

Additionally, the study emphasises the need to examine the role of community and state actors in perpetuating cycles of violence and discrimination. Policy frameworks must be designed to enhance protection and support for vulnerable communities, ensuring their survival and well-being. By documenting the lived experiences of minorities, this study contributes to a broader understanding of the challenges faced by populations at risk of extinction and underscores the necessity for immediate and sustained efforts to address their victimisation.

Further research should also investigate how people can change or leave these stages, including psychological and structural barriers. Furthermore, the fear of extinction can be empirically validated as a precursor to mass violence (for example, pogroms, genocide) and how communities subjected to this threat perceive it.

Conclusion

The research explored the psychological and experiential aspects of the extinction threat perceived by minority communities that left Bangladesh. Through in-depth interviews with 20 resettled minorities, the research identified six underlying themes – shumiliation, threats, violence, persecution, loss and coping – that together contribute to this sense of fear of extinction. The findings illustrate how a sequence of traumatic events culminates in a subjective awareness of extinction, revealing the profound psychological toll of systemic victimisation.

By tracing the development of this fear, the study adds to broader discussions about forced migration, collective trauma and minority persecution. It highlights a pressing

need for targeted psychological support, policy interventions and international awareness to address the long-term impacts of such extinction threats. Future research could build on these findings with comparative cases across different minority groups, and explore resilience mechanisms that may alleviate fear of extinction. Finally, this work seeks to reframe the discussion surrounding the psychological aspects of persecution by calling on policy makers and practitioners alike to consider the importance of mental health and protection for vulnerable populations facing fear of extinction.

ORCiD IDs
Rajat Mitra https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2433-6313
Pankaj Singh https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7346-3554

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